

Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, 5/29/12



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James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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MR. CARNEY: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the White House for your daily briefing. I have no announcements to make at the top, so I will just take your questions.

Ben Feller of the Associated Press.

Q Thanks, Jay. I wanted to talk about Syria today. Kofi Annan said after meeting with President Assad that we are at a tipping point. And I'm wondering if the White House agrees the world is at a tipping point in this situation, given the massacre there. And if so, from the White House perspective, what are you tipping towards in terms of action?

MR. CARNEY: I'd say a few things. First of all, this weekend's massacre is a horrifying testament to this regime's depravity. The international community is united in its revulsion at the regime's actions through both its military and its thug forces, and we are ratcheting up the pressure on and isolation of this murderous regime.

We clearly have made clear in our statements that we believe a political transition is essential in Syria. We support the Annan plan, although we remain skeptical about Assad's willingness to abide by it. He has certainly shown no evidence that he will do that in the past. We will continue to work with both the Security Council and the broader coalition of "Friends of Syria" to place pressure on the Assad regime and to assess further steps, if that becomes necessary.

Q Well, you talk about ratcheting up the pressure, working with partners and the Security Council. Are there any clear next steps?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I don't want to get ahead of the consultations we're having with our allies, the work we're doing with the Security Council. I think as you know, today the United States expelled the top Syrian diplomat from Washington, working in coordination

with a number of nations, our allies, who did the same thing. And we will continue to work with, again, as I said, members of the Security Council to consider punitive measures against Assad should Assad continue to refuse to comply with the Annan plan.

Q And would those punitive measures potentially include military action?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs has said, no -- military action is always an option, you never -- and we haven't in this case removed options from the table. We do not believe that militarization, further militarization of the situation in Syria at this point is the right course of action. We believe that it would lead to greater chaos, greater carnage.

However, again, we are assessing the situation and we are working with our allies and with the Security Council as we continue to give the Annan plan support and hope that the pressure on Assad has an effect. We also obviously believe that there is a desire among some of the members of the Assad regime to defect. We encourage those who would to take that action, to separate themselves from a regime that would go down in history as notable principally for its willingness to murder its own people.

Q The U.S. took action with NATO in Libya to prevent a threatened massacre, and such a massacre has now occurred in Syria and threatens to continue that direction. The administration is supporting the Annan plan, but with great skepticism. At what point do you declare that plan dead and move on to further action? You've been saying now for several weeks that there's extreme skepticism.

MR. CARNEY: Well, as you know, I believe, Mr. Annan went to Damascus, was in Damascus and has been presenting the need for Assad to abide by his commitments under the Annan plan. The comparison with I think Libya is one that requires a great deal of recognition of the differences between the two. And as you know, in a unique situation with regards to Libya, with a broad international consensus, a request for military action from the opposition, and the fact that forces loyal to Qaddafi were on the verge of assaulting an entire city and with the promise of annihilating residents of that city, we were able to act with our allies to prevent that.

Every situation within the Arab Spring and the circumstances is different as we've said on numerous occasions, and certainly the situation in Syria is different from what it was in Libya.

Q Just one other thing. The President has made much of his foreign policy accomplishments in both policy and campaign speeches, like the killing of Osama bin Laden, ending the war in Iraq, even helping in the ouster of Qaddafi, but we haven't really heard him speak much about the situation in Syria. Would you call the President's Syria policy, his approach to what's happening now in Syria a success, a failure, or is the verdict out on this?

MR. CARNEY: I think the situation in Syria continues to evolve. What we have been clear about from the very beginning is that we support a democratic transition in Syria. We have called on the Assad regime to stop its brutal treatment of its own people, its

merciless killing of its own people. We have unified a great number of nations in the effort to isolate and pressure the Assad regime in the cause of that political transition and will continue to do that.

Obviously, the situation in Syria is far from what we or any nation that cares about the people of Syria hopes it will become. The political transition has begun, but it is far from complete. We still believe very strongly that Assad has to go, that he has long since forsaken his ability to preside over a peaceful political transition in that country, and has demonstrated his utter disregard for the will of and protection of his own people.

As for assessments of that policy, I think we'll leave that for others to make. But we're working very closely with our allies, with our partners in the "Friends of Syria" coalition, supporting the opposition, helping it stand itself up, helping it unify, providing nonlethal assistance, providing humanitarian assistance and, again, working together to further pressure -- further isolate and put pressure on the Assad regime.

Let me move around a little bit. I got yelled at for going left to right. We'll go Norah and then Jake.

Q More than 10 countries have now expelled Syrian diplomats. How would this stop another massacre?

MR. CARNEY: This is clearly a way to demonstrate the international community's absolute disgust and horror at the actions taken by the Assad regime. The United Nations has made clear that it was the Assad regime that was responsible for the massacre over the weekend that included so many women and children, included the use of tanks and heavy artillery as well as house-by-house, street-by-street killings.

Obviously, no single action like that diplomatic action stops the regime from its brutal behavior. But it is a cumulative effort and it is important in that it demonstrates just how isolated the Assad regime has become, how far afield from the international community it has positioned itself in the brutal pursuit of its own continued existence at any cost.

We'll work again, as I said in answer to other questions, with our partners. We'll work and consult with the members of the Security Council on next steps, even as we continue to support the Annan plan, because it helps at the very least create a situation where the political transition can move further down the field in anticipation of Assad's eventual departure from power.

Q Forty children were massacred in Houla and the administration's response is to coordinate with 10 other countries to get them to withdraw diplomats. Is this just a slap on the wrist?

MR. CARNEY: I think our response, as you know, Norah, has been far broader than that. Again, I'd just described this as a step -- one of the steps, one of the many steps that the United States and other nations have taken and will continue to take to isolate and pressure the Assad regime.

Make no mistake, it is a horrific example of the brutality of this regime, the extent to which it is willing to go in order to preserve its own power. The depravity and disregard for human life that is demonstrated by this is terrible. And we will continue to make that clear to the world. We will continue to work with our partners and consult with other members of the U.N. Security Council to discuss future measures that we can take to make clear to Assad that this kind of behavior is not, and will not be, tolerated by the international community.

Q And would the U.S. discourage any Gulf nations from arming opposition groups?

MR. CARNEY: I think, as we have said, the concern is that further militarization of the situation in Syria could lead to greater chaos, could lead -- could make it harder to achieve the political transition that the Syrian people deserve. There is -- the nature and shape of and the membership of the opposition is still something that we and our partners are assessing. And that is another consideration that has to be acknowledged when efforts like that are undertaken.

Our position now is to provide non-lethal assistance, to provide humanitarian assistance, and to work with our allies and partners to further pressure and isolate the Assad regime.

Jake.

Q One of the ways that you and others in the administration have distinguished what's going on in Syria and why the U.S. is not getting directly involved from what happened in Libya is because of the international coalition -- in other words, the fact that Russia and China are not supportive of action or even willing to abstain from voting in the Security Council, and also, the Arab League and how they were united for action against Libya or the Libyan regime are not so now. How much of an effort is the President and administration officials making with Russia, China, members of the Arab League, and why are they reluctant to see this as anything other than a great humanitarian crisis?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think there's a significant amount of analysis you could do on why Syria is different from Libya, why different countries are viewing this differently -- because of historic relationships, because of the ethnic makeup of different countries. I think there are experts in the field who can explain that better than I can.

What I would simply say is that what you put forward in your question is part of the reasons why these situations are different. There was unity within the region. There was unity at the level of the United Nations Security Council. We are absolutely -- and have been -- in consultations with the members of the Security Council, including the Russians and the Chinese, about this matter. We've been pretty clear about that. We were very clear about our disappointment over the veto of the initial Security Council resolution. And I think that the actions that Assad has taken since then make clear what his intentions are, what the likelihood is that he will abide by the Annan plan. And that's a point that we are making publicly and privately with our allies and others around the world.

Q And there was a New York Times story today by Jo Becker and Scott Shane about the way that President Obama conducts some of the counterterrorism operations. One of the things that I think was most interesting was the fact that one of the ways that the administration has been able to assert that there have been so few civilian casualties in any of these drone attacks is because the presumption is that if you are in these locations you are guilty of terrorism. And there's almost a guilty-until-proven-innocent quality. I'm wondering how on Earth the administration can square that with the President's past language on human rights and avoiding civilian casualties.

MR. CARNEY: I think your description of the policy is not quite exact. I would refer you to John Brennan's speech not long ago on these matters, in which he was very explicit and transparent about methods that are used in our counterterrorism operations and the care that is taken to avoid civilian casualties. We have at our disposal tools that make avoidance of civilian casualties much easier, and tools that make precision targeting possible in ways that have never existed in the past.

And I think that this administration's commitment, this President's commitment to, A, go after those who would do harm to the United States and do harm to our allies is clear. This President's first and primary -- this President's first priority is the protection of the United States, protection of the citizens of this country, and he takes that responsibility enormously seriously. And that is why he has pursued the fight against al Qaeda in the very direct way that he has.

But he also believes very strongly in the need to avoid civilian casualties in the pursuit of that objective, in the pursuit of al Qaeda, and goes to extraordinary measures in order to achieve that, and again, has at his disposal -- this administration does -- tools that allow for the kind of precision that in the past was not available.

Q I mean, it's pretty to think so, but I just don't know --

MR. CARNEY: It's a fact, Jake.

Q It's a fact that he has tools to avoid civilian casualties?

MR. CARNEY: Yes.

Q So are you disputing The New York Times story or the excerpt in The Daily Beast today that there have been civilian casualties?

MR. CARNEY: I'm not -- I don't have the assessments of civilian casualties. I'm certainly not saying that we live in a world where the effort in a fight against al Qaeda, against people who would without compunction murder tens of thousands, if not millions, of innocents --

Q No, I'm talking about the innocent people that the United States killed.

MR. CARNEY: -- that we don't live in a world where it is possible to achieve no civilian casualties. What I'm saying is that we are able to -- this administration is able to, our military and our broader national security team is able to pursue al Qaeda in a way that significantly reduces the potential for and the fact of civilian casualties.

Q Right. With the assumption -- and here's the question -- with the assumption that if you are with a terrorist when a terrorist gets killed, the assumption is that you are a terrorist as well, and even if we don't even know who you are, right? Isn't that part of the reason you're able to make these assertions?

MR. CARNEY: I don't have -- I am not going to get into the specifics of the process by which these decisions are made. What you know is that there are -- the care taken here is significant and the tools that are at our disposal are unique and effective in terms of limiting civilian casualties. But beyond that, I can't really go into great detail.

Jessica.

Q I'd like to follow up on Syria, but quick with a simple question. Why is the Vice President in Delaware this week? And if it's for the occasion I believe it is, can you tell us who made the dress? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: I think you have given away here the fact that the Vice President's daughter is getting married -- I think which is public actually -- this weekend. And the Vice President is hosting the reception at his house. As any father would, he takes this matter very seriously and looks forward to it with great happiness for his daughter and his future son-in-law. And I have no details on the dress.

Q On a more serious matter, following up on Syria, can you tell us a little bit more about what role the President and the administration believe Russia should play in Assad's transition from power?

MR. CARNEY: I would simply say, in repeating a little bit of what I said earlier, that we are working with all the members of the Security Council and the broader international community to make clear the importance of pressuring Assad -- making clear who is responsible for the violence and brutality in Syria and the responsible party is clearly Assad and his regime.

And I would simply say that we are working with the Russians, as well as others, on potential next steps to continue to pressure Assad and isolate him. I'm not going to speak for the Russians in terms of how they view things, but that is certainly our view.

Q And what will it take -- hasn't it gotten bad enough for the President to pick up the phone and speak to Putin directly?

MR. CARNEY: Well, as you know, the President spoke with President-elect Putin I think prior to his inauguration, and looks forward to meeting with him in the near future at the G20 summit in Mexico. I don't have any conversations to read out to you at this time with

foreign leaders. But I can assure you that we are at a variety of levels consulting with both the Russians and other nations on this matter.

Q Jay?

MR. CARNEY: Yes, Ed.

Q Can I ask you about the Pakistani doctor and what the administration is doing on that? Because his brother is saying that he's been tortured by the Pakistani officials, that he had gone months without seeing sunlight, that they were not feeding him, he was emaciated -- that he was tortured. So what is the administration doing to prevent this torture from continuing and getting him free?

MR. CARNEY: I think what I can tell you, Ed, is what I said earlier, which is that we certainly believe that -- and know that anyone who assisted the United States in the effort to bring Osama bin Laden to justice was working against al Qaeda but not Pakistan -- certainly not Pakistan. We have made our views known that the doctor in question here should not be held, that he did nothing that would justify him being held, and we're certainly consulting with the Pakistani government on this matter. But I don't have any other details for you.

Q There's no plan B? I mean, obviously you've made that case. The Pakistanis still have him. You just --

MR. CARNEY: I just said that we're in consultations with and certainly making our views known to the Pakistani government.

Q I want to go back to the kill list because back in 2008 in the campaign, the President was pretty explicit about saying he was going to prosecute the war on terror a lot differently from President Bush, that he had a much less muscular view of executive power. And so I wonder as a constitutional law professor, he can square the idea that he has a kill list and is killing people who could be as young as 17 years old for suspected of being terrorists.

MR. CARNEY: President Obama made clear from the start to his advisors and to the world that we were going to take whatever steps are necessary to protect the American people from harm, and particularly from a terrorist attack. At the same time, the President also made clear from the outset of his administration that we were at all times going to act in a manner that was both lawful and consistent with our values. And he has done that in both cases.

He is very serious about protecting the United States, protecting its citizens. As you know when he took office, he inherited two wars. He has ended the war in Iraq. He has refocused our attention on -- through a comprehensive review of our policy in Afghanistan, a situation in Afghanistan that he inherited, that was broadly viewed as adrift, a policy without a goal -- he refocused that and made it clear that we are in

Afghanistan with the primary objective of eliminating al Qaeda -- disrupting, dismantling and ultimately defeating al Qaeda and preventing al Qaeda from -- preventing Afghanistan from again being a haven for al Qaeda.

Q When you say "lawful," what part of the Constitution -- what specific law allows a President of the United States to have a kill list and basically launch drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, places where we're technically not at war, we're crossing into their borders and killing people?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would say -- first of all, again, I would point you to the very in-depth and comprehensive speech given by John Brennan on this matter with the level of detail and transparency that I think is unprecedented. And he addresses these issues, again, with a great deal of depth.

I would secondly say that the capacity of the President of the United States as Commander-in-Chief to go after members of al Qaeda who have as their goal the destruction of -- or the killing of Americans and doing harm to the United States I think is well established through the authorization of the use of military force and other means -- and other aspects of the law.

But again, for specifics I would refer you to Mr. Brennan's speech.

Q So if -- the administration has been very aggressive about prosecuting leaks of intelligence information. So how do you square that with The New York Times saying three dozen current and former Obama officials spoke about some top-secret deliberations? How does that square with prosecuting other cases where you say sensitive information is being leaked, people need to go to jail, but Obama officials can just talk about these things?

MR. CARNEY: That's an interesting way to phrase it, Ed. But the -- I haven't had a discussion --

Q (Inaudible.)

MR. CARNEY: I haven't had a discussion with anybody about the article in question that you're talking about this morning and what's contained within it. Again, I think that a certain amount of detail was --

Q You haven't talked to anybody in the White House about the front page of The New York Times?

MR. CARNEY: In terms of the context that you're talking about, in terms of possible leaks within it. What I will refer you to is the speech given by the President's Counterterrorism Advisor not too many weeks ago that discusses these issues in a great amount of detail.

Q Jay, is there no concern on the secrecy of how you're going about this, with this kill list? You were just saying in not responding to Jake's question that you weren't going to make public some of what the President weighs, but in this issue of potentially killing

civilians and it's the President playing judge and jury here at the end of the day, which is what this report is indicating -- don't you need some form of transparency? This is exactly the type of cloak and secrecy that candidate Obama was criticizing during --

MR. CARNEY: I would, again, point you to -- and I'm not sure if any of you have read it -- I hope that --

Q I've read the speech multiple times.

MR. CARNEY: -- of you have, and there is a certain -- significant amount of discussion of that, of these issues, within the speech delivered by John Brennan. Secondly, we are engaged in conflict with al Qaeda and it is the responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief to pursue members of al Qaeda and to bring them to justice either through capture or by eliminating them from the battlefield --

Q You guys are using same loose definition of this that the -- loose definition of the declaration of war that President Bush --

MR. CARNEY: That's actually not the case, Chuck. And we have held ourselves to the highest possible standards in terms of the actual execution of counterterrorism operations. That means exercising lethal force only under the most stringent of conditions, including reducing the risk to innocents as much as possible, something that we are capable of in part because of the tools that we have available to us.

I think that when you look at the way to -- the various potential ways to take the fight to an enemy like al Qaeda, I think that using some of these tools is preferable when you are concerned about civilian casualties than, say, launching a full-scale invasion by land where civilian casualties are always a great potential risk. So it is certainly the case that there are risks in terms of civilian casualties. They cannot be eliminated entirely. But there are means by which the President can pursue this policy and does pursue this policy that allows us to significantly reduce those risks.

Q Are you concerned at all that the drone policy and the policy of how the President uses the drones to go after members of al Qaeda ends up serving as a recruiting tool, a la Guantanamo?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would simply say what I've said already, that we take -- we make great efforts to reduce the risk of civilian casualties. We are absolutely committed to -- the President is absolutely committed to going after those who would do the American people harm and makes no apologies for that. But he does it in a way that is both non-ideological, that is practical, and that makes sure that we adhere to the law and our values.

When it comes to recruiting, again, I would make the comparison that using tools that significantly reduce civilian casualties but are effective I would judge -- I think many would judge -- as more preferable in terms of the impact on potential recruiting to introducing U.S. forces or foreign forces into some of the areas and countries in the region.

Q Are you -- last question -- are you -- is the United States willing to act on Syria without Russia? Or has this sort of waiting on -- before we enact our next level of whatever we're - - however we'll change our policy when it comes to Syria -- are we waiting on Russia?

MR. CARNEY: I don't want to speculate about what steps might be taken in the future. I can simply tell you that we're working with members of the Security Council as well as others on potential next steps. We are supportive still of the Annan plan and call on Assad to abide by his commitments there. We are skeptical that he will. He has certainly not demonstrated much intention thus far of abiding by that plan. But there is a -- the plan is important for other reasons, including helping prepare the way for further political transition.

Q Is the United Nations the only avenue we're pursuing --

MR. CARNEY: Well, again, I don't want to -- I'm not ruling anything in or out. I'm simply saying that, in answer to some questions about the Russians and other members of the Security Council, acknowledging that we do have ongoing discussions with those nations.

Q Jay, you several times have mentioned the need to use policies to go after those who would do the U.S. harm. Would the use of computer viruses be part of that?

MR. CARNEY: I think that's a question in reference to a story that I have no comment on at this time.

Q What is the level of awareness here of the Flame virus?

MR. CARNEY: Again, I read the story but beyond that I just don't have any comment.

Q Who do you think is behind it?

MR. CARNEY: I just don't have anything I can say about that right now.

Q Why?

MR. CARNEY: I just don't.

Laura.

Q You've been asked several questions about Syria, but I don't think you've specifically been asked to respond to Mitt Romney's charge this morning on this, which reflects what he said before -- that it was time to start arming the opposition and that -- and "it's far past time for the United States to begin to lead and put an end to the Assad regime. President Obama can no longer ignore calls from congressional leaders in both parties to take more assertive steps." You may just respond with another reiteration of what you've already said, but if you could -- if I could get you to respond to his calls.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I would simply say that we continue to believe that further militarization of the situation in Syria is not the right course of action to take at this time. We are working with the opposition -- helping it unify, helping it stand itself up -- we, with other members of the "Friend of Syria" group. And I would note, as others have, that we are still assessing who makes up the members of the opposition and whose interest they represent and serve. And obviously not all of them represent and serve the democratic interest of the vast majority of the Syrian people.

Q And another -- on a different topic. Today, the Romney campaign went after the President on Solyndra, and saying that essentially it's the example of tax dollars invested not to create jobs but essentially in failure, and that this money has essentially gone to a bankrupt company. And the implication is that this is much worse than anything that went wrong with Bain, that this is taxpayer money and it went to companies that went bankrupt. Could you respond to that?

MR. CARNEY: I would simply say what we've said all along, which is that this President is committed to the proposition that we will not cede the industries of the future to the Chinese or the Europeans or the Brazilians or the Indians, or any other nation on Earth. Clean tech industries will continue to grow. And some, apparently, in this country are willing to see those industries developed and the jobs created, those industries created in other countries than the United States.

The President of the United States, the current President, President Obama, refuses to allow that to happen. He believes that we need to make necessary investments in clean energy so that we do not cede those jobs, that we do not cede those industries to the Chinese or other nations. The American people broadly agree with that proposition.

The programs that the President has supported, either like the DOE loan program that was actually created under the Bush administration, but President Bush -- President Obama has supported, and under which the program that provided a loan to the company you mentioned came to pass, and other programs that either through loan guarantees or tax credits -- like the production tax credit that we've been talking about lately -- that these are the kinds of investments that we should be making in this country to ensure that the United States of America is the country that dominates in these fields in the 21st century, because some country will.

There is no question that clean energy technologies will play a huge role in the economy, the global economy, in the 21st century. And the President simply disagrees with those who are fine with the proposition that other countries should have those industries and that we should be -- or we should move from the situation where we're dependent on foreign nations for oil to a situation where we're dependent on foreign nations for clean energy technology. President Obama disagrees with that proposition very strongly.

And it is the same -- I mean, I think that those who disagree with it are basically saying they disagree with the investments that allowed for DARPA and then ARPA, the creation of the Internet -- which obviously was funded by the U.S. government -- and other programs -- key periods in our history, economic history in this country that have seen

transformational developments through technological innovation that have been supported by the United States government. And that is a principle that the President believes in strongly.

Q Has he done a good job in making decisions? Has the administration done a good job about making decisions about who to invest, where to invest?

MR. CARNEY: I think that the program, again, as created under the Bush administration and pursued by this administration has always acknowledged that not every company invested in would necessarily succeed. That is why companies like that needed investments in order to scale up to allow them to grow and succeed. Not all of them would grow and succeed. The portfolio, as I understand it, contains a number of companies that are progressing and succeeding.

So again, if the suggestion is that the United States should wash its hands of these investments, I think you all need to assess that for what it means, which is saying the Chinese can have these industries, the Brazilians and the Europeans and the Indians can have these industries, and we'll simply import that technology -- just like we've been dependent on foreign oil. I think that is a wrongheaded proposition.

Q The last thing. If that's the argument, how is that different from the Romney -- Romney's argument of Bain Capital, which is that many succeeded and a few failed?

MR. CARNEY: Look, there is the difference in that your overall view of what your responsibilities are as President and what your view of the economic future is. And the President believes, as he's made clear, that a President's responsibility is not just to those who win, but those who -- for example, in a company where there have been layoffs or a company that's gone bankrupt, that we have to make sure that those folks have the means to find other employment, that they have the ability to train for other kinds of work. And that's part of the overall responsibility that a President has.

Stephen.

Q When the President justified the Libya operation, he said that it was a case in which just because the U.S. couldn't intervene in every place where civilians were oppressed it shouldn't be an argument for never intervening on behalf of what's right. By that yardstick, has he made a decision that it might be morally right to intervene in Libya [sic], but for various and political reasons it's just impossible?

Q Syria.

MR. CARNEY: As your friends are pointing out, I think you mean intervene in Syria.

Q Sorry, in Syria.

MR. CARNEY: Again, I think I've made pretty clear what our position is on Syria, the work we're doing with members of the Security Council and other nations to further pressure and isolate the Assad regime, the differences between Libya and Syria, the very

practical differences that exist and why the analogy doesn't hold up completely. So I mean, I think that is my answer to you -- that there simply are differences, and we are working with our allies and partners and members of the Security Council to assess the situation and assess further action.

Margaret.

Q So Terence Flynn from the National Labor Relations Board -- I've spoken to you about him before -- finally did resign in the wake of allegations of releasing non-public information before they were issued. And I wanted to ask what the White House's reaction is. What would the President be looking for in a replacement nominee? And are you comfortable with his decision to basically give him what appears to be two months of paid, non-work time before he actually leaves?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think I would refer you to the NLRB and to the IG for anything specific to the investigation of those circumstances. And as far as potential nominees that the President might put forward, I can't speculate on any announcement before the President has the opportunity to make one.

Q But can you tell me does the President agree generally with his decision to step down?

MR. CARNEY: I haven't spoken about that with him.

Victoria, and then, Mark.

Q Mitt Romney will become the Republican presidential nominee tonight after the Texas primary. But he will be in Las Vegas at a fundraiser with Donald Trump, who is the nation's primary birther. He had an opportunity to separate himself from his birtherism yesterday, but he didn't do that. Not talking about birtherism, what do you think this says about Romney as a candidate that he has chosen not to separate himself from Trump at this time as he goes into being the nominee?

MR. CARNEY: I would refer you to Chicago for assessments like that. I would simply say the judgments the President makes, and I think broadly speaking, every candidate for high office has to make is, how are you going to run your campaign. And I think you'll recall that in the 2008 race, Senator John McCain -- who many of us know pretty well here -- made a decision not to ally with extreme elements in his own party. I think some have criticized that of late, which I find a little surprising. But I refer you to the reelection campaign for further analysis of that.

April. I'm sorry, Mark, then April.

Q You were talking a few minutes ago about opposition groups in Syria and the need to make sure that those groups had the democratic interest of the Syrian people. And it makes me wonder about this AP story that was published last week that said that the U.S. was ready to "vet opposition groups on behalf of countries that might be interested in shipping them arms." I'm wondering if that's a middle ground where the United States

isn't involved in shipping arms itself -- which, as you've said many times you're opposed to -- but at least make sure that the arms that are going to be shipped by Arab neighbors end up in the right hands.

MR. CARNEY: Well, I'd say two things. One is our position hasn't changed, which I've just described. We know where we are on this, and that's why we continue to provide nonlethal support to the opposition. And I can only speak for the United States, and we know that others are pursuing other types of support. I would say that it is not surprising, given the horrific actions of the Assad regime, that some countries feel compelled to pursue additional measures in support of the Syrian people.

As for vetting, I would refer you to what I said earlier, which is, obviously we and many nations that are -- that consider themselves friends of Syria are assessing the opposition as we help them stand themselves up and help them unify. And I don't think we're alone in that, and I think that's both in the interest of the Syrian people as well as in the interest of other nations who are supporting the opposition.

Q But doesn't that tacitly acknowledge the reality that arms are going to flow to opposition groups?

MR. CARNEY: Again, we can't speak for other nations and we can't prevent other nations from taking actions that are different from ours. Our belief is, and our policy is that the right approach is to provide nonlethal assistance and humanitarian assistance.

We are in the process, and continue to be in the process of evaluating the opposition, assessing the various groups that are in opposition to the Assad regime. And the vast majority of the Syrian opposition is supportive of a democratic transition, but it's clear, obviously, that some elements are not. And those assessments are ongoing. Broadly speaking, we're working with the "Friends of Syria," we're working with the member of the Security Council to consider further steps to isolate and pressure the Assad regime.

April, and then Andrei.

Q Two issues -- one on the economy and then a follow-up to Victoria. On the economy, the unemployment extension safety net ends this summer, and there are reports of concerns over if consumer spending would be affected once this happens. Could you talk to me about White House thoughts about this issue, about the end when still so many people still looking for work, and the fact that this could cut into consumer spending?

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think it's a great question. I would say two things. The fact of the matter is that unemployment insurance has been extended as long as it has because this President has fought for it, in the face of economic conditions that have prevailed, and fought for it against the resistance of some in Congress. That was the result of -- we often talk about the extension of the payroll tax cut, but the other component of that was the extension of unemployment insurance.

The fact that some assistance will be running out reinforces the need for Congress to act on measures that will have a demonstrable and immediate positive impact on the economy, on economic growth and job creation. And the President, as you know, has provided Congress with a "To-Do" list that includes 5 measures that would do just that. And these are the kinds of things that have in the past and should in the future enjoy support from not just Democrats but Republicans. So the President will continue to talk about the need to take measures to help economic growth, to help job creation.

We've come a considerable distance from the time when the President was sworn into office and we were hemorrhaging jobs at a rate of 800,000 per month, from the time when the President was sworn into office and we now know that the United States economy had just experienced a nearly 9 percent contraction in the fourth quarter of 2008. We've now had quarter after quarter of positive economic growth. We've now had 26 months of private sector job creation, but we have a considerable distance to travel to fully recover from the worst recession since the Great Depression.

That's why we need to take action where we can to help homeowners refinance, to ensure that 7 million students across the country don't see their student loan rates double. We need to make sure that veterans have the opportunity to find work in this country after serving us nobly abroad in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are things we can do right now, including extending the production tax credit that we talked about last week that will help this economy and help it create jobs.

Q Now, following up on Victoria. You're using John McCain as a shining example of what a candidate should do to stand up for truth. Are you -- is this administration calling on Romney to denounce the words -- not the person, but the words -- of Donald Trump? Particularly -- and I kind of disagree with you when you say this is from the campaign -- this White House has taken on the issue. The President has gone up -- the President even went at the -- during this administration, you guys have taken on this issue from this room. The President himself stood up there. And also at the Correspondents Association dinner, President Obama knocked Donald Trump out last year -- out of the race. So can --

MR. CARNEY: Well, I think -- it was a Republican race. I don't think the President did that.

Q Oh, you don't think so? (Laughter.)

MR. CARNEY: Let me address this. First of all, you're talking about the period last year where, aided and abetted by certain media organizations that considered this actual news, we did have to address the issue. But not because we chose to, but because it was such a ridiculous distraction from the important business that we should be doing here, that the President is committed to doing, and Congress should be doing, to help the economy grow and help it create jobs. We can revisit that, but I think the American people are pretty fed up with this kind of nonsense.

So again, I think that I would ask you to consult with my friends at the campaign and consult with those who are either allying themselves with --

Q -- renounce the words?

MR. CARNEY: -- this kind of stuff themselves or espousing it.

This President is focused on, one, his absolute responsibility to take all the necessary measures to protect the American people; and, two, his firm commitment to help the economy grow, help it create jobs, take the measures necessary to do that working with Congress and working administratively.

My point on the other thing was that I recall as a journalist that in 2008, John McCain made that choice, that there was a line beyond which he was not willing to cross -- or beyond which he was not willing to go when it came to some of the rhetoric on the extreme side of his party. And it's up to every candidate to make a decision about how they want to run their campaign.

Q Would you like to see Mitt Romney ask Donald Trump to denounce those words?

MR. CARNEY: I think those are questions that you can ask --

Q Mitt Romney himself believes --

MR. CARNEY: I think those are questions you can ask his campaign or the candidate himself, or you can address to the President's campaign.

I did promise you, Andrei.

Q Jay, Ambassador McFaul was in hot water again in Moscow after making comments that our two governments were competing in trying to bribe a different government -- trying to bribe a different government -- Moscow and Washington are competing to do that, in his words. And he's made some other comments like that. And now, I know from experience that for the diplomats their cardinal rule is, do no harm. So now the Russian diplomats are saying he's breaking that rule. They say his comments are not in accord with the tone of the messages exchanged recently between our two Presidents.

So my question to you is, first, is it in accord with the messages, with the tone of the relationship? And then secondly, isn't he undermining his own effectiveness as a diplomat by sort of saying out loud things that people don't probably say in that position?

MR. CARNEY: I know there was an issue. I'm not familiar with the specifics of it. I can simply say that Ambassador McFaul is an expert in these matters. He is the President's envoy to Russia, has been integral in the effort at improving -- that this administration undertook, that this President undertook, to improve relations with Russia in the wake of the previous administration's relations with Russia.

The reset has produced tangible positive results both for this country and for Russia. We continue to have disagreements with Russia, there is no question -- as you know, Andrei - - but the policy that this President has pursued and that Russia has pursued with him has

been one that deals with those conflicts, deals with those disagreements without letting them upset the possibility and the reality of pursuing other areas where we can reach agreement in ways that benefit both countries.

So that's the approach the President is taking. That's the approach the Ambassador is taking. And I think -- I mean, you can perhaps address your questions to the State Department, but that's all I know about it.

Thank you all very much.

END

2:40 P.M. EDT